

**DECLINING ENROLMENT IN ONTARIO:
WHAT CAN HISTORY TELL US AND WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?**

[Sean Robertson](#), *District School Board Ontario North East*

and Northeastern Catholic District School Board

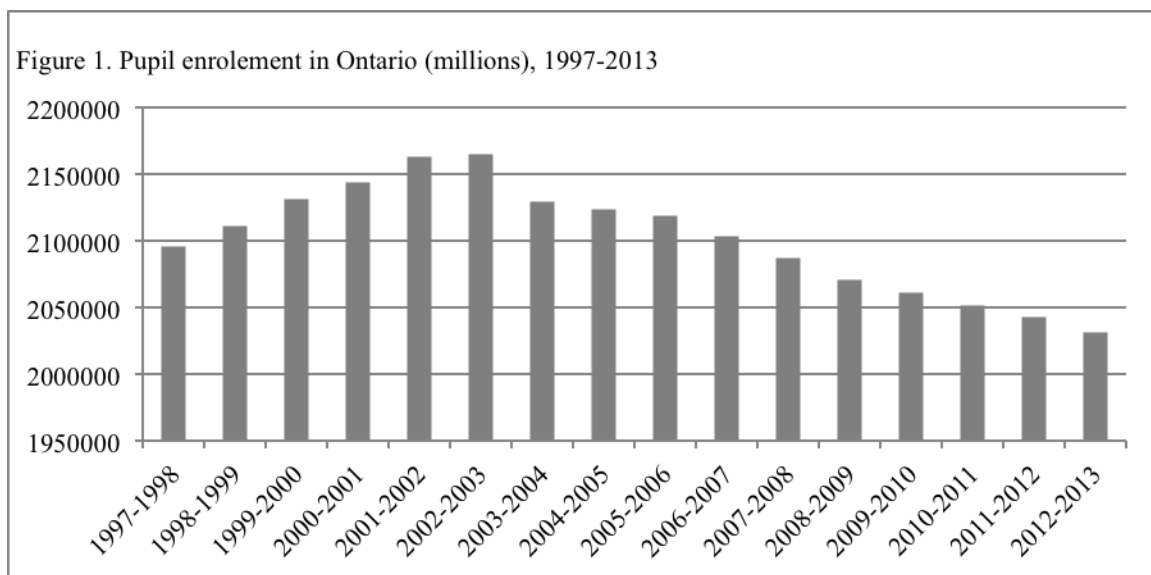
Declining student enrolment is a phenomenon being faced by many school authorities throughout Canada. This is particularly important for policymakers since governments provide the bulk of education funding on a per pupil basis. In jurisdictions across Ontario, where population demographics and economic factors negatively impact enrolment, the influence on education services can be dramatic. The purpose of this paper is to assess and to explore past and present policy responses to demographic change and to discuss ways policymakers can mitigate the adverse impacts of declining enrolment.

Introduction

In common with many jurisdictions across North America the province of Ontario is currently facing a period of declining pupil enrolment (Declining Enrolment Working Group, 2009; Foot, 1999; People for Education, 2012). This affects policymakers, as education funding is mainly provided on a per pupil basis by governments. In Ontario, where population demographics and economic factors play a large role in determining school enrolment, the impact on education services can be significant. School closure or consolidation, curriculum offerings, classroom composition, and staffing levels can all be deeply impacted during times of continued declining enrolment. In exploring past and present policy responses to demographic

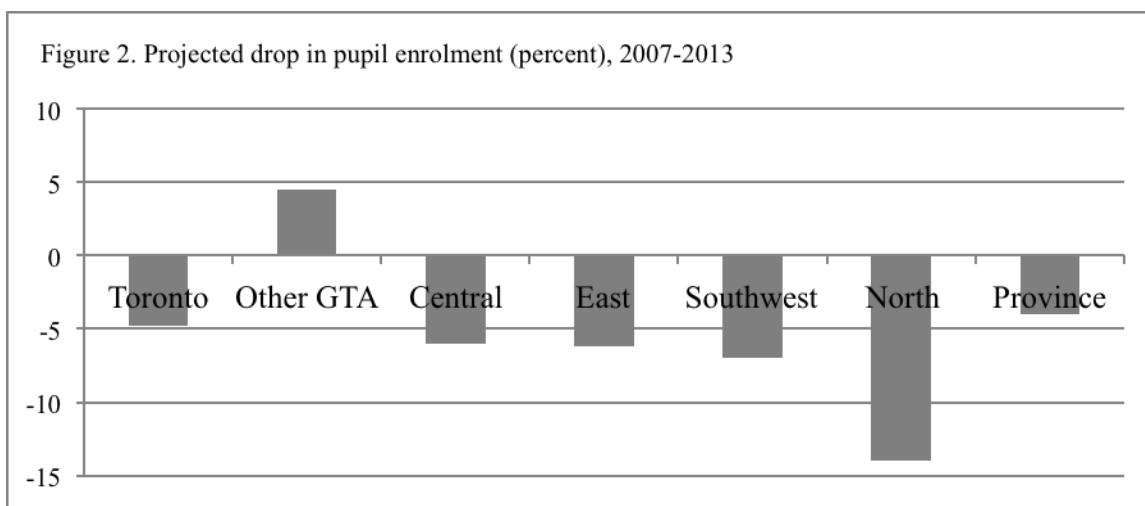
changes, policymakers can alleviate the challenges that declining pupil enrolment place on the education system.

In Ontario's publically funded education system, enrolment reached its zenith during the 2002–2003 school year, as shown in Figure 1, and has since faced a period of decline. According to the report of Ontario's Declining Enrolment Working Group (2009), over the period 2002–2003 to 2007–2008 there was a 3.4 % decline in the number of school-aged children in Ontario, and the Working Group projected a further decline of 3.8 % between 2009–2010 and 2014–2015 (Declining Enrolment Working Group, 2009, p. ii).



Adapted from the Ontario Ministry of Education (2014), *Education Facts*.

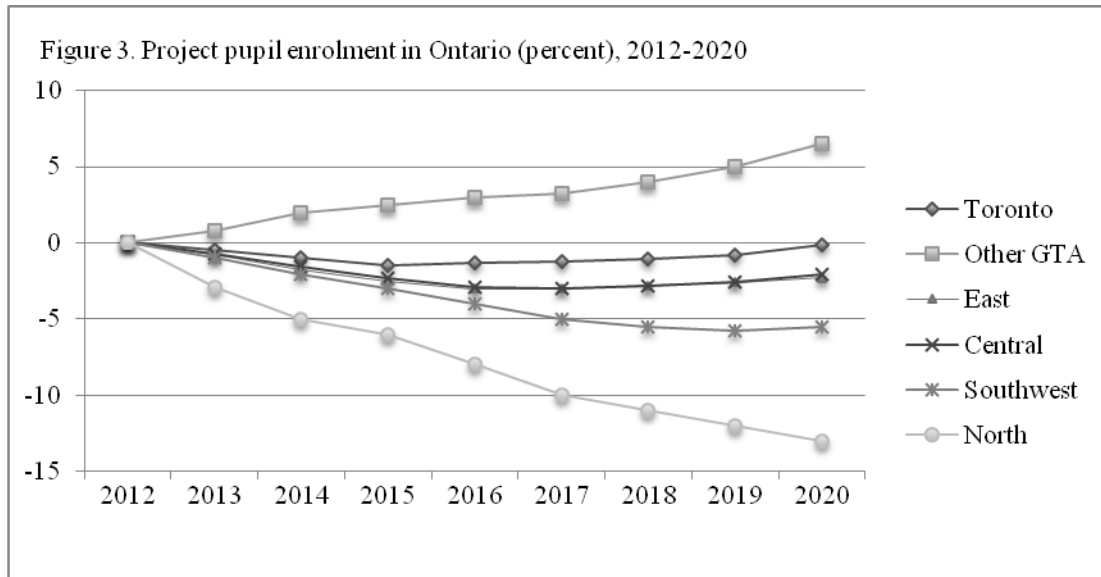
As shown in Figure 2, of Ontario's seven regions examined by the provincial government's Declining Enrolment Working Group, only "other GTA" (communities in the Greater Toronto Area [GTA] excluding Toronto proper) is projected to show signs of growth between 2007–2008 and 2012–2013 due to factors such as increased immigration and higher fertility rates (Declining Enrolment Working Group, 2009).



Note: Projected data is used, as actual percentage drop in pupil enrolment per region of Ontario is publically unavailable. Adapted from the Declining Enrolment Working Group (2009, p. 9).

The process of declining enrolment is important for policymakers to understand given what Mulcahy (2007) describes as the “domino effect” linked with this phenomenon. Reductions of educational personnel, increased workload, funding reductions, increased numbers of combined classrooms, the use of distance education, and increased pressure to close and to consolidate schools are all exercised by policymakers as means to deal with declining enrolments (p. 22–23). Compounding the present challenges created by declining enrolment is the province’s current economic outlook. The *Commission on the Reform of Ontario’s Public Services* (Ontario Ministry of Finance, 2012), commonly referred to as the Drummond Report, suggests further funding reductions to the Ontario education system that will increase the challenges faced by policymakers. With this in mind, it is important that the experience of declining enrolment become well understood from a historical and current perspective to help address the delicate policy issues that face today’s education system. This fact has been neglected in the academic literature from a uniquely Ontario-centric perspective, which this paper aims to address.

While Ontario is facing a period of declining enrolment, the phenomenon is not expressed equally across the province. As Figure 3 shows, declining enrolment is much more dramatic in areas such as northern Ontario.



Note: Projected data used, as actual percentage drop in pupil enrolment is publically unavailable for 2012–2014 period. Adapted from the Declining Enrolment Working Group (2009, p. 10).

In fact, as outlined by the Declining Enrolment Working Group (2009), between 2002–2003 and 2007–2008 Northern Ontario faced an enrolment decline equalling 12 %. Furthermore, Northern Ontario is projected to face an added decline of 12 % during the 2012–2020 period (pp. 8–9). Factors such as the global economic downturn, youth out-migration, and the volatility of the primary resource sector all negatively influence enrolment numbers during this period (pp. 23–24). Given that many northern schools are rural and are only operating at partial capacity, the region is likely to face pressure for school closure or consolidation. The impact of such events can have detrimental effects on local communities. Community schools are often seen as key cultural institutions and are economic generators for communities that are already struggling.

Additionally, when local schools close or consolidate, students would likely be required to travel longer distances to another school, since communities in Northern Ontario are widely distributed.

Closely attached to the issue of declining enrolment is the funding of public education. Enrolment is an important input in school finance models since the majority of funding in the province is provided on a per pupil basis. The main sources of funding for Ontario's schools, the Grants for Student Needs, are largely based on enrolment. According to the Declining Enrolment Working Group (2009), there has been a shift in Grants for Student Needs to allow for other factors in addition to enrolment in determining how much funding a school receives. For example, during the 2002–2003 year, 75 % of the Grants for Student Needs were based solely on enrolment, while this percentage dropped to 66 % during the 2007–2008 year (Declining Enrolment Working Group, 2009, p. 16). While most funding remains based on enrolment, there are a large amount of other grants that aid school boards in meeting their financial obligations. These “transitional” grants help school boards adjust to declining enrolment over a period of time, as not all educational costs can be scaled back within a short period of time. Even with such grants, the bulk of funding is based on student enrolment meaning policymakers are inevitably faced with tough decisions about how to maintain budgets while offering a quality education to all students.

Declining enrolment in Ontario is not a uniquely recent occurrence. The province was faced with declining student enrolment as early as 1970s, as the high fertility rates of the baby boom began to decline. As a result, the Commission on Declining Enrolment (1978) was convened in Ontario and chaired by R.W.B. Jackson, the founding director of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (Foot, 1999). Extremely in-depth in character, the commission's report explored all aspects of the education system regarding declining enrolment

and presented its comprehensive findings to the government of the day. Similarly, as declining enrolment resurfaces as an issue faced by the education system today, the Ontario government convened a Declining Enrolment Working Group to formulate strategies on how to tackle this issue in the province.

Apart from these government commissions, reports, and sporadic academic tracts spread over the past three decades, the writing on declining enrolment in Ontario appears on an infrequent basis, concentrated mostly during the late 1970s following the Commission on Declining Enrolment (1978) and the present period during the 2000s as declining enrolment is again becoming a major policy issue. As recognized in the literature (Declining Enrolment Working Group, 2009), publications on declining enrolment are generally written after the phenomenon has impacted the education system, leaving policymakers with little to rely on when forming policies. While on the one hand the general topic of declining enrolments tends to create little public interest, the concrete realities of school closures and consolidations may create substantial local engagement and friction with school boards. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to use past lessons derived from a literature review, coupled with present-day solutions from various jurisdictions, to provide possible policy strategies to best address the current issue of declining enrolment in Ontario and other areas experiencing the same phenomenon. This is significant given the future challenges policymakers will be faced with as declining enrolment will continue to impact many aspects of the education system for years to come.

Historical Context

Placing declining enrolment in a historical context is a useful way of understanding how the phenomenon affects policymaking over the long-term. The history of education in

Ontario from the 1970s to the present provides a backdrop, showing how policymakers dealt with the issue of declining enrolment during a period of economic decline somewhat similar to today's situation. Therefore, the past can help us understand declining enrolment and how different policy solutions have fared in reducing the negative impact of these changes on the education system.

As described by Gidney (1999), the baby-boom generation was making its presence strongly felt in the education system during the early 1970s. Enrolment was on the rise, in both elementary and secondary schools, and school boards responded by gearing the system for growth by building schools, hiring more teachers, and varying the curriculum. The province also expanded the post-secondary system as baby-boomers graduated from the K–13 system in large numbers (Foot, 1999, par. 5). But, as Gidney (1999) notes, “the province’s fertility rates had taken a nose-dive . . . in the late fifties and early sixties, it stood at something like 3.7 births per woman . . . by 1971 it had declined to 2.2, or what is usually considered to be the level of zero population growth; by the mid-1970s, it had fallen to 1.8” (p. 110). In addition, the early 1970s was a period of economic regression during which immigration to Ontario declined from the late 1960s through to the 1970s (p. 110).

By the late 1970s, enrolment had stabilized in the province’s elementary schools. Policymakers had responded by closing schools, reducing school personnel, increasing multi-grade classes, and adjusting curriculum programming (Gidney, 1999, p. 111). However, the issue of declining enrolment had not evaporated; secondary schools were now feeling its impacts. Rural areas were increasingly depopulated as families moved in large numbers to urban areas, while families in city centers were drawn to the suburbs to raise their children and avoid the growing urban decay prevalent in many Ontario cities during this period (Gidney, 1999, p. 111).

Therefore, declining enrolment was not only a factor of declining fertility rates, but was also impacted by factors such as migration. To add some perspective, Gidney (1999) states that “between 1970 and 1985 the province lost 250,000 students . . . by 1984 there were 2000 fewer teachers than a decade earlier . . . [and] by 1985 there were 7000 fewer jobs in the elementary schools than in 1970—a loss of 12 per cent” (p. 111).

While the 1970s and early 1980s was a period of decline, Foot (1999) notes that by the late 1980s, “the baby-boom echo generation, the children of the boomers, had arrived, and through the 1990s they have been moving through the system just as their parents did 30 years ago” (par. 7). In other words, the 1980s and 1990s brought a renewed period of growth in the education system as enrolment increased and policymakers retooled for a period of growth. However, as Foot (1999) points out, “the number of births in Canada peaked in 1990 . . . and since then births have been declining . . . the declining birth trend can be expected to continue well into the new millennium” (par. 8). As previously stated, enrolment numbers in Ontario peaked during the 2002–2003 school year corresponding to the peak in the number of births experienced in the early 1990s and have declined ever since. Once again, a system that was geared to the student enrolment growth of the 1990s required adjustment when enrolment began to drop. It also appears that Foot (1999) is correct in his assumption that declining birth trends can be expected to continue into the distant future. According the *Ontario Population Projects Update* (2008), the portion of the population composed of children aged 0–14 is projected to decline from 19.4% in 2001 to 15.5% in 2031. Additionally, the portion of the population composed of children and young adults aged 15–24 is also projected to decline from 13.4% in 2001 to 11.0% in 2031 (p. 11). Essentially, Ontario is becoming an older population, with less

need for kindergarten to Grade 12 educational services since the number of school aged children as a proportion of the population is diminishing.

As declining enrolment makes its way through the province's elementary schools and is now hitting secondary schools full force, it can be expected, based on projections, that declining enrolment will continue to impact policy. It is in this spirit that policymakers will need to examine the choices in front of them, and, in using lessons from the past, best gear the education system for the current period of decline. Of course, demography is not an exact science, but is a powerful instrument in developing overall population trends. As Foot (1999) argues, understanding demographics is a key factor in best tooling the education system to progressively deal with declining enrolment rather than address it after the fact. According to Davis and Lewis (1977), "demographers who consulted on school projections in the late fifties and early sixties discussed the early indicators that things could be changing, but evidence of the senses to the contrary was too persuasive" (p. 1). Even Ontario's Commission on Declining Enrolment (1978) and the Declining Enrolment Working Group (2009) were convened at least a decade after demographers had predicted large drops in enrolment, again revealing the tendency for policymakers to *react to* rather than *plan for* the challenges resulting from declining enrolment. Hence, it is critical to use history and demographics as policy tools to predict and deal with declining enrolment *before* it makes its impact on the education system.

Methodology

In examining the literature for possible policy implications regarding declining enrolment, this paper employs components of a systematic literature review. Essentially, "a systematic literature review is a literature review following a rigorous, transparent and

reproducible process, which aims to identify, select, appraise, analyse and synthesize, in a systematic and comprehensive way, research evidence on a specific research topic” (Becheikh et al., 2010, p. 3). Additionally, “systematic reviews are . . . considered as the least biased and the most rational way to synthesize research evidence, and a powerful tool to provide the best available knowledge for decision making” (Becheikh et al., 2010, p. 3). As Becheikh et al. states, systematic literature reviews follow a number of key steps, which “include 1) formulating an explicit research question, 2) fixing inclusion and exclusion criteria, 3) finding relevant studies, 4) selecting the studies according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 5) assessing the quality of retained studies, 6) summarizing and synthesizing study results, and 7) interpreting the review results” (p. 3). In applying components of a systematic literature review, it should be noted that this paper places an emphasis on research and scholarly work based in the Ontario context. The historical work on declining enrolment is somewhat limited, meaning that the work cited up to the 1980s is largely taken from most available information from various jurisdictions. In making the research more manageable, more prominent works were sometimes chosen, as they were representative of the research at large. The goal was not to simply summarize the works of the period, but to provide a general consensus of the time. The work cited from the 1990s onward is Ontario-centered or related to a similar context, as is the case with Newfoundland, which has experienced declining enrolment through a similar context as northern Ontario. A more narrowed approach was needed from the 1990s onward given that there is a growth in academic literature on declining enrolment, yet the information is diverse and often written from a framework different than this paper.

In establishing a literature review, it is also important to find reoccurring patterns and themes to cluster the data to make it more manageable. As mentioned by Cohen, Manion, and

Morrison (2009), this type of research “can bring benefit to educationalists [by] . . . yield[ing] insights into some educational problems that could not be achieved by any other means” (p. 191). Furthermore, “the historical study of an educational idea or institution can do much to help us understand how our present educational system has come about; and this kind of understanding can in turn help to establish a sound basis for progress of change” (p. 192). In acknowledging a historical perspective, the literature review followed a chronological framework, beginning in the late 1970s and concluding with the present day. The literature is diverse, as the Declining Enrolment Working Group (2009) points out, and the academic literature on declining enrolment is written both from historical and from current perspectives. This being so, the literature is defined and limited by the fact that it focuses on rural areas, since these represent the locations where declining enrolment is first noticed and has the largest impact. Additionally, most of the literature on declining enrolment is dated, emerging from various jurisdictions during the 1970s and early 1980s (p. 23). Likewise, the Declining Enrolment Working Group (2009) also notes that there are a number of common themes in the literature, including 1) declining enrolment reduces the flexibility that school boards have in allocating resources, resulting in program and staffing cuts, 2) split-grade classes often result from declining enrolment, and 3) consolidation and school closure often result in school boards dealing with ways to grapple with budgetary constraints (p. 23).

Many of the works from the 1970s are periodicals that discuss declining enrolment following the conclusion of the *Commission on Declining Enrolment*, 1978, that was, again largely a reaction to declining enrolment that was otherwise predictable based on demographic projections. In the final report of the *Commission on Declining Enrolment* it was evident that declining enrolment would have “probable consequences . . . on school organization, staffing,

and funding” and that the impacts of declining enrolment would be far reaching throughout the education system (Royal Commission on Learning, 1994, p. 9). The commission itself was massive in scope, containing many committees and working groups. Therefore, in order to make a literature review more manageable, it should be noted that periodicals that reflect the findings of the commission were used as opposed to the direct findings of the commission itself. The literature of the 1980s is more limited and composed of periodicals that discuss how secondary school administrators should formulate policy on declining enrolment as the problem. Literature on declining enrolment during the 1990s is almost non-existent since a spike in the fertility rates in the 1990s made the problem less relevant to policymakers who were concerned with finding space for the growing amounts of students. It is not until the late 1990s that the literature picks up, in the form of demographic analysis and newspaper articles that called for schools to gear up for a period of declining enrolment. Finally, much the literature produced in the 2000s is diverse and studies declining enrolment from various perspectives, including government reports, research periodicals, and reports from non-governmental organizations. Overall, the largest amount of literature was written during the 2000s and is beneficial because it is directly related to declining enrolment in the current context. Yet while the recent work on declining enrolment is diverse, the lack of a systematic approach by educational authorities and academics continues to demonstrate the reactionary nature taken toward the impacts of declining enrolment that this paper seeks to address.

Literature Review

The 1970s

During the late 1970s, academics and policymakers were struggling to understand and deal with declining enrolment as it was beginning to make its presence felt. Davis and Lewis (1977), in *What Are the Consequences? Coping With Declining Enrolment*, lament the fact that policymakers did not see declining enrolment coming even if demographers as far back the 1950s indicated that population growth was not going to remain a continuing trend. As the authors state, “with a burgeoning economy, increasing revenues and expandable budgets, the answer was to build and recruit and to stay ahead of growth” (p. 1). However, with a decrease in the fertility rate during the 1960s, the impact on population growth was critical. National enrolment patterns in the United States began to fall yet it was hard to deal with this decline in enrolment as the phenomenon was not uniform across all jurisdictions. Moreover, an aging population and an economy facing stagflation only augmented the challenges policymakers faced.

The authors preferred a number of solutions to the above mentioned policy problems. First, they suggest finding new teachers, or retraining current ones to fit school needs, as opposed to hiring specialist teachers. Their line of thinking seems to be that it is cheaper to retain current teachers and retrain them than find new hires to fill positions. Second, they argued that if school offered more vocational based curriculum programming, they could share the cost of training with vocational institutes. Third, and related to the second policy solution, is the notion that schools could share facilities with other groups and institutions could operate more effectively.

Eisenberger (1977), in “Declining Enrollments: Implications for the School Curriculum,” embraced the fact that declining enrolment demands more creative managerial

skills on the behalf of school administrators and that it may be seen as an opportunity for secondary school renewal in the face of growing public pressure to reform the education system. In her policy suggestions, Eisenberger first advocated that administrators must plan ahead, exploiting enrolment data to better prepare schools for declining enrolment using methods of modeling and forecasting. Second, Eisenberger suggested eliminating low-level achievement classes for other classes, such as consumer education, which she sees as courses having more usefulness in society. Third is the notion that school facilities could be better shared with other institutions to help share costs and provide job training for students. Fourth, Eisenberger advises that schools revisit the idea of the 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. school day; in doing so, they can attract adult learners who otherwise work or are looking for continuing education possibilities. Finally, Eisenberger pushes for increased communication among school staff: “Of all the challenges facing . . . administrators, perhaps the most immediate is the need to communicate the reality of declining enrollment to professional staff and the community” (p. 53). Hence in better utilizing demographic data, decisions can be made gradually, such as changes in course offerings or partnerships and resource sharing among institutions, all the while keeping stakeholders informed to avoid the shock factor that results from reactionary decision making.

Hickcox and Ryan (1979), in “Governance and Administration in a Period of Declining Enrollments,” ask the question of how educational administration and its approach to organizational issues are affected by declining enrolment. While their article explores the constraints declining enrolment placed on the education system of their time, their “alternative policies and strategies” section has relevance for the current policy context. In it, they outline eleven separate means by which the education system can be served in a period of declining enrolment and the implications this has for administration.

First is the idea of reducing centralized administration positions: “In such a move, the role of the school principal takes a more managerial tone, with the implication that some in-school administrative functions would filter to assistant principals, heads, and teachers” (Hickcox & Ryan, 1979, p. 313). Second, by reducing administration, Hickcox and Ryan suggest creating only short-term administrative positions where “an individual might be brought in for a year or two years . . . the effect of lack of mobility and lack of opportunity for advancement could be minimized” (p. 314). Third, the authors suggest electing school board trustees for a longer duration of time while also providing them with extensive training in issues including finance to help them understand and deal with topics such as declining enrolment. Moreover, decreasing the number of trustees would also act as a cost saving measure, especially in a period when there are fewer families with children for trustees to represent within the community. Fourth, Hickcox and Ryan explore the idea of school boards taking on a larger role in the community, with “the formation of a broad-based board in the community, responsible for all education-related services . . . in addition to the responsibility for elementary and secondary education, such a board would be accountable for libraries, parks and recreation, adult education services, and other education related activities” (p. 315). Fifth, is the sale and reallocation of excess buildings and land to produce capital; however, the authors add the caveat that assets be leased should enrolment ever increase and education authorities are left buying back the land at a higher price. Sixth, Hickcox and Ryan discuss the use of itinerant teachers (p. 316). The idea behind this is that when teachers have more qualifications, fewer teaching staff is needed because educators are able to teach more subjects, requiring fewer subject specialists. Of the last five overall policy options, Hickcox and Ryan focus on the provincial government and the ministry of education in addressing declining enrolment. They advocate support to assist with

minimal programs, especially in rural areas, as well as long-range financial planning with local input, so that school boards are better able to address declining enrolment. Ultimately, the authors suggest that the provincial government readdress the demarcation of school district boundaries, explore the increased use of funding based on fixed costs as opposed to funding based on enrolment to mitigate the sudden financial impact declining enrolment brings on school boards, and improved communication in the provincial-local relationship to increase cooperation.

Written in response to the *Commission on Declining Enrolment* (1978) is Connelly and Enns's (1979) study, "The Shrinking Curriculum: Principles, Problems, and Solutions." Both authors served on the Curriculum Task Force for the *Commission on Declining Enrolment* (1978), and offer insight into the recommendations for addressing declining enrolment. As for short-term recommendations, Connelly and Enns make no specific recommendations besides suggesting "it is our belief that as school systems adjust their curriculum to the demands of declining enrollments, they should do so on a local basis, making whatever adjustments are best for the local situation" (p. 283). Yet, they do suggest that the ministry of education endeavour to establish an advisory team to aid boards in dealing with declining enrolment. In the long-term, Connelly and Enns (1979) are far more expansive in their recommendations. They suggest that the Ontario curriculum remain dedicated in the individuality of the student, and that this should be reflected in any curriculum regardless of declining enrolment. The authors forward the notion of an expected minimum range of curriculum opportunities, and that planning will be required, especially in small boards where the loss of one teacher can mean the loss of an entire section of the curriculum. They also promote the addition of early childhood and adult education, as well as increased correspondence education, but they acknowledge that this must be done with an understanding of the financial strains these additional programs would place on school boards.

The 1980s

The literature of the 1980s, which is focused on the declining enrolment then being faced by secondary schools, typically deals with how administrators can adjust to financial and political pressure. In Deal's (1983) "High Schools Without Students: Some Thoughts on the Future," he examines the pressure declining enrolment places on the shoulders of the school principal. He argues that, rather than decline, the present problem should be seen as an opportunity for renewal. In finding solutions for declining enrolment, Deal suggests increasing enrolment through a number of efforts, namely moving junior high school students up to secondary school a year earlier, increasing adult education prospects, and expanding into providing training opportunities for private sector organizations. In terms of cutting back, Deal suggests, "retaining the core but dropping the frills" both in terms of school curriculum and physical assets such as buildings (p. 486). To Deal, school merging and closing is an acceptable practice as long as policymakers make decisions that bring a sense of revitalization and changing opportunities to a local community.

In proposing policy for dealing with declining enrolment, Deal (1983) also suggests three approaches policymakers and administrators can adopt depending on their context. This is particularly important to the author, especially when school mergers and closings are acceptable policy options that often result in public backlash. First is a rational approach, which "would have cuts occurring among those programs, staff members, or facilities that are least effective" (p. 487). Second is the political approach, requiring that "a school administrator or district superintendent plays a heavy handed role in making cuts . . . political strategies unfold in private, behind the scenes" (p. 487). Third is the symbolic approach, so that "decision making . . . emphasizes the importance of negotiation and symbolic interactions among various

constituencies as avenues for building a shared justification for cuts and as opportunities for individuals to vent their anger and grieve their losses” (p. 487). As the author notes, these approaches to decision making are largely contextual, and depend on the relationship between school authorities and those impacted over subsequent decision making. In the event that an amicable relationship exists between administrators and the community, a more conciliatory approach may be taken. Nevertheless, if the fiscal situation within a school district is dire or there is a lack of agreement between school authorities and the various interest groups, a more authoritative approach may be required to meet the challenges of declining enrolment where consensus may not exist. In the end, administrators may find themselves using a mix of the above methods to tackle issues arising from declining enrolment.

The 1990s

As already mentioned, declining enrolment had evaporated during this period as birthrates spiked in the early 1990s, meaning there was little written on the topic at this time as schools were geared for growth. Gidney’s (1999) *From Hope to Harris: The Reshaping of Ontario’s Schools* explores declining enrolment during the 1970s through a historical lens, as his book is aimed at writing a general history of education in Ontario from the 1950s to the late 1990s. It offers a view of the impact of declining enrolment and how policymakers dealt with the issue during the 1970s and 1980s, but offers no real exploration of the impact and direction of any specific policy alternatives or solutions.

However, Foot (1999), in *Schools Are Closing. Why Are We Surprised?* advocates for informed policy making that involves employing demographic data in decision making. As he comments, “school closings are an important issue . . . what we need is an informed,

co-ordinated and innovative approach to the closing of schools . . . demographics—yet again—provides the road map” (par. 15). Furthermore, as a policy alternative, Foot mentions that “one innovative solution in an aging population would be a partnership between the local hospital or home-care facility and the board of education . . . classrooms could be converted into units for seniors” (par. 13). He also cautions against allowing emotions to guide school consolidation and closure, because even though school consolidation and closure affect community cohesion and local property values, emotion-based decisions can lead to unnecessary waste of public funds which can be put to better use elsewhere in the education system.

The 2000s

Two government reports presented to the ministry of education, including Downey’s (2003) *Strengthening Education in Rural and Northern Ontario: Report of the Rural Education Strategy* (2003) and *Planning and Possibilities: The Report of the Declining Enrolment Working Group* (2009), as well as the *Ontario Population Projections Update* (2008), produced by the ministry of finance, make up the bulk of government research literature. As for recommendations, Downey (2003) makes numerous recommendations, and although they do not all deal with declining enrolment, many recommendations are aimed at lessening its effect. The report suggests because of the geography of spreading rural communities and schools, the government should provide top-up funding for transportation difficulties and the hiring of full-time administration and support staff, regardless of school population. Related to an increase in funding is the addition of teaching staff to avoid untenable multigrade situations and to ensure that minimal expectations are reached in terms of having specialist teachers offer subjects such as French and special education. Additionally, the report also mentions that specific provincial

grants should be fixed, because “when schools are kept open they must be heated, lighted, and cleaned in their entirety regardless of how few students they house” (Downey, 2003, p. 16).

As previously cited in this paper, the *Ontario Population Project Update* (2008) does not directly deal with declining enrolment, but does discuss at length population projections for school aged children. That said, the Declining Enrolment Working Group (2009) and their report is perhaps the most wide-ranging source in understanding declining enrolment in Ontario. Based on a deluge of consultations, compiled statistics, and a great deal of research, the working group produced four primary recommendations regarding how the province should deal with declining enrolment. First, is the idea that school boards should use “a comprehensive multi-year, enrolment-based planning process based on a common, province-wide template and supported by business intelligence tools that would enable boards to take a proactive approach to planning for enrolment change” (p. iv). Second, the working group recommended “measures to build community dialogue and to encourage the wider use of effective partnerships both between boards and the schools and between boards or schools and community organizations” (p. iv). Third, it was recommended that boards and the ministry find “ways to promote e-learning and alternative program delivery as part of the solution to the effects of declining enrolment, while urging the government to ensure that all students have equitable access to broadband connectivity” (p. iv). Finally, the Declining Enrolment Working Group (2009) advocates for “changes to the education funding formula that would provide more effective supports for boards facing declining enrolment and incentives for boards to find a better balance between resources and expenditure” (p. iv). Consequently, the working group’s recommendations follow an approach that calls on school boards to use demographic data and community consultation,

combined with alternative delivery models and the sharing of resources, to better plan for and react to the impact of declining enrolment.

As for refereed journal articles, the present academic environment has failed to address adequately declining enrolment as a current policy issue from a uniquely Ontario perspective. Most of what is written derives from a rural context, such as Mulcahy's (2007) "Current Issues in Rural Education in Newfoundland and Labrador." In the article, Mulcahy describes the present context in Newfoundland and Labrador as it faces declining enrolment similarly to the situation in northern Ontario. Like northern Ontario, Newfoundland and Labrador contains a largely rural population spread over a large area. Enrolment has been declining in the province, and there is increased pressure to close or consolidate schools since there is a perception that a larger school can offer more courses and services to students. However, in addressing policy, Mulcahy (2007) notes that "there is no research evidence presented . . . [in] substantiating any of these claims" that larger schools are necessarily better for students (p. 29). He claims that many policies also "fail . . . to adequately discuss the effects of long distance bussing on students' health, wellbeing or academic achievement" (p. 29). In arguing for the survival of rural schools, Mulcahy points out the importance of schools to the culture of the local community, as well as the ability of rural schools to partner with e-learning to offer courses and maintain quality learning in rural areas. Mulcahy (2007) writes, "students attending small community schools can have the best of both worlds . . . they can enjoy many advantages that come with small-scale learning communities *and* have access to any course or program to which they aspire" (p. 32). Conversely, Mulcahy (2007) still reminds the reader that there are issues, such as "equity of access [to broadband], the appropriateness of online distance education for all learners, the educational equivalency of online and face-to-face instruction, and the effect of an increased

reliance on distance education at the high school level on all grade levels” (p. 34). In these respects Mulcahy’s article promotes the notion of maintaining small local schools, essential to community culture and student well being, while utilizing advances in technology to promote online learning and greater access to learning opportunities for rural students.

People for Education (2005, 2012) has addressed the issue of declining enrolment thoroughly in their literature. They support small schools, based on their research, which shows that these schools “improve student achievement, increase attendance and graduation rates, elevate teacher satisfaction, improve school safety, and increase parent and community involvement” (People for Education, 2005, p. 8). As for policy solutions, they offer many that can be clustered in four groupings. First, they propose that excess school space can be used to house other community services such as community centres, libraries, and health clinics following an integrated services model. Second, People for Education (2012) advise that the current provincial funding formula be reviewed, especially since “the province is also reducing the Declining Enrolment Grant and phasing out Supported Schools Allocation, which covered the higher costs of school spread apart” (p. 2). The third suggestion is that schools should have established minimums with respect to how many administrators, teachers, and school support staff are in each school and to ensure students have access to sustainable curriculum and resources. Finally, People for Education recommend that accommodation review process used to evaluate whether a school should remain open should become more transparent and inclusive. With the impact a school closure has on a community, municipalities should play a larger role in the process and the social and economic impact school closure and consolidation can have should play a strong role in policymaking.

Results:

Common Themes and Recommendations From the Literature

As shown in Table 1 below, there are nine primary policy solutions that come out of the literature on declining enrolment.

Table 1
Systematic Literature Review Findings

Policy solution	Author(s) that discussed particular policy solution
Retaining or moving teachers	David and Lewis (1977); Hickcox and Ryan (1979)
Partnering with other social services or community organizations OR leasing property to produce revenue	David and Lewis (1977); Deal (1983); Declining Enrolment Working Group (2009); Eisenberger (1977); Foot (1999); Hickcox and Ryan (1979); People for Education (2005); People for Education (2012)
Employing demographics and forecasting for better prediction and adjustment	David and Lewis (1977); Declining Enrolment Working Group (2009); Eisenberger (1977); Foot (1999)
Increased use of early, adult, and e-learning education opportunities	Connelly and Enns (1979); Deal (1983); Declining Enrolment Working Group (2009); Eisenberger (1977); Mulcahy (2007)
Reduction in central administration costs	Hickcox and Ryan (1979)
Strategic cutting of programs and establishing minimums	Connelly and Enns (1979); Deal (1983); Declining Enrolment Working Group (2009); Downey (2003); Eisenberger (1977); Hickcox and Ryan (1979); People for Education (2005); People for Education (2012)
Increased communication between government and boards to make common policy	Connelly and Enns (1979); Declining Enrolment Working Group (2009); Downey (2003); Eisenberger (1977); Hickcox and Ryan (1979);
Better communication, transparency, and consultation with local communities	Declining Enrolment Working Group (2009); Downey (2003); Eisenberger (1977); People for Education (2005); People for Education (2012)
Adjustments to the funding formula	Declining Enrolment Working Group (2009); Downey (2003); People for Education (2005); People for Education (2012)

When comparing the policy discussed, three main solutions are prevalent: 1) partnering with other social services and community organizations, or leasing property to produce revenue, 2) strategic cutting of programs and establishing minimums for curriculum and staffing, and 3) better communication, transparency, and consultation with local communities. It should be noted that while most policy solutions are present among the literature from the 1970s to the present,

proposed solutions including an increased use of e-learning and adjustments to the funding formula stem from the present context. The remaining literature is spread across the historical context of this paper.

Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusions

The literature review, as shown in the results, demonstrates that three policy solutions are prevalent in the literature. First, partnering with public and private organizations is a way to spread the costs associated with running the physical infrastructure of a school. It is a reality in many rural schools that drops in enrolment have led to decreased funding, while operating costs related to building maintenance remain relatively the same regardless of enrolment. When costs are shared with other organizations, this may act to lessen the financial burden placed on the school board. Furthermore, when schools share their facilities, there can be an integration of services that better benefits the community at large. In this sense, schools are not only saving money by sharing facility costs, but also better serving the community by providing “one-stop-shopping” for government and community services. Given the current economic climate, it makes sense that schools and other public organizations integrate with each other to save operating costs. Likewise, when schools rent out their excess space to other organizations, this creates a revenue stream to support school operations. Moreover, when space is leased, it can eventually be retained for school use should the demand for space increase. However, it should be noted that school authorities would also have to be cognisant of increased wear on physical plant, cleaning, security, and other contingent costs that could mitigate the fiscal benefits arising from integrated community services.

Second, strategic cutting of programs and the establishment of minimums were also mentioned across the literature. As schools are funded by highly sought after public money, they must be accountable to the taxpayer. In a period of declining enrolment, this means decreased funding because there is the perception that if there are fewer students to educate, schooling should cost less. Although to some degree this is true, there are certain fixed costs that cannot be quickly adjusted for; therefore, policymakers must be very strategic in choosing how they cut funds. This leads to the notion of establishing minimums that schools must meet which was also popular in the literature. Ensuring that students have access to all facets of the curriculum, that all infrastructure needs are met, and that there are necessary administration and teaching staff are important in maintaining the equity of the education system among students in schools who are experiencing enrolment declines and budget cuts.

Better communication and openness between school boards and local communities was also well represented in the literature. As many authors noted, schools are frequently the cultural lifeblood of a community as well as a major economic generator, and school closures and consolidation are events that can have a divisive and a dramatic impact on small communities. By increasing opportunities for consultation, communities can have a partnership in the process, and when municipalities are included in the process, creative alternatives can be made in avoiding school closure and consolidation. Additionally, when local communities and school boards consult one another, understanding can be made regarding tough budgetary constraints and the place of the school in the community. As such, local communities are part of the process, as opposed to being dictated to by a school board or the provincial government. Unfortunately, even with increased consultation, feelings of angst cannot always be avoided as school board

administration must make difficult decisions where to use limited or decreasing amounts of capital.

Upon compiling the literature from the past three decades and applying it to the context, there are four primary recommendations that are important for policymakers to consider and that generally are echoed in the literature published in the last five years:

- School boards must be provided with guidance in dealing with issues of declining enrolment following a common framework provided by the ministry of education; the framework should 1) allow room to reflect the degree to which an area is facing declining enrolment and should 2) provide possibilities for creating public and private partnerships to more effectively utilize excess space, share costs, and produce revenue
- The funding formula must be reviewed and should be based less on a per pupil basis and more on ensuring that schools are able to offer a minimum of services under manageable conditions to maintain the equity of the education system
- Concerning school closure and consolidation, communities should be involved in the process as schools are a key cultural component in a community; municipalities should be active players in the process
- E-learning is a viable option for increasing opportunities for students; however, it should not completely replace in-class learning since not all students are suited for online learning and it deprives students of aspects of the hidden curriculum (i.e., social interaction)

While a literature review reveals a number of policy options and considerations policymakers can adopt, paradoxically, there is little literature evaluating the effectiveness of such policy choices. As declining enrolment is attached to demographic trends by the time policies have been adapted to address declining enrolment, enrolment either stabilizes or increases. Thus, energies are placed into revamping the education system for growth as opposed to decline. This represents a major deficit in the literature that academics and policymakers should aim to fill as declining enrolment has a cyclic effect. Here, this paper is limited by the fact

that it can offer policy solutions, but cannot necessarily offer an insight into their success in lessening the impact of declining enrolment. As Connelly and Enns (1979) suggest, “it is our belief that as school systems adjust their curriculum to the demands of declining enrollments, they should do so on a local basis, making whatever adjustments are best for the local situation” (p. 283). It is in this spirit that declining enrolment can be best addressed to ensure our education best meets the needs of the twenty-first century learner.

References

- Becheikh, N., Ziam, S., Othman, I., Castonguay, Y., & Landry, R. (2010). How to improve knowledge transfer strategies and practices in education? Answers from a systematic literature review. *Research in Higher Education Journal*, 7, 1–21.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2007). The ethics of educational and social research. In L. Cohen, L. Manion & K. Morrison (Eds.), *Research methods in education* (6th ed., pp. 51–77). London: Routledge.
- Connelly, F., & Enns, R. J. (1979). The shrinking curriculum: Principles, problems, and solutions. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 9, 277–304.
- Davis, R. G., & Lewis, G. M. (1977). What are the consequences? Coping with declining enrollments. *NASSP Bulletin*, 61(1), 1–7.
- Deal, T. E. (1983). High schools without students: Some thoughts on the future. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 64, 485–491.
- Declining Enrolment Working Group. (2009). *Planning and possibilities: The report of the declining enrolment working group*. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario. Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/DEWG.pdf>
- Downey, J. (2003). *Strengthening education in rural and northern Ontario: Report of rural education strategy*. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario. Retrieved from <http://www.ontla.on.ca/library/repository/mon/6000/10315140.pdf>
- Eisenberger, K. E. (1977). Declining enrolments: Implications for the school curriculum. *NASSP Bulletin*, 61(407), 47–53.
- Foot, D. K. (1999). *Schools are closing. Why are we surprised?* Retrieved from <http://www.footwork.com/globe6.asp>
- Gidney, R. D. (1999). *From Hope to Harris: The reshaping of Ontario's schools*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Hickcox, E. S., & Ryan, D. W. (1979). Governance and administration in a period of declining enrolments. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 9, 305–320.
- McWilliams, S. (2008). *Declining enrolment in Ontario public schools—Implications for the teacher labour market* (Discussion Paper 2008-03). Retrieved from Queen's University, Industrial Relations Centre website: <http://irc.queensu.ca/sites/default/files/articles/declining-enrolment-in-ontario-public-schools-implications-for-the-teacher-labour-market.pdf>
- Mulcahy, D. M. (2007). Current issues in rural education in Newfoundland and Labrador. *Education in Rural Australia*, 17, 17–39.

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2014). *Education facts: Schools and school boards*. Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/educationFacts.html>

Ontario Ministry of Finance. (2008). *Ontario population projections update, 2007–2031: Ontario and its 49 census divisions*. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario. Retrieved from <http://www.ontla.on.ca/library/repository/mon/22000/281647.pdf>

Ontario Ministry of Finance. (2012). *Commission on the reform of Ontario's public services*. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario. Retrieved from <http://www.fin.gov.on.ca/en/reformcommission/>

People for Education. (2005). *Ontario's small schools*. Retrieved from <http://www.peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Ontarios-Small-Schools-2005.pdf>

People for Education. (2012). *Declining enrolment/school closings*. Retrieved from <http://www.peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/declining-enrolment-early-release-2012.pdf>

Royal Commission on Learning. (1994). Chapter 2: Education and Society. In *Report of the Royal Commission on Learning: For the Love of Learning* (Vol. 1, p. 9). Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario. Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/abcs/rcom/full/volume1/chapter2.pdf>